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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on an investigation into the communication activities in a multicultural elementary school classroom in England. In the first exercise, the whole class worked in groups of three, each group led by a bilingual child, to devise a doctor-patient dialogue in that child's foreign language. When the dialogue was presented to the class, it was the task of the class to discover what was being said based on the context and gestures in the six foreign languages of the students. In the role playing, the foreign language children appeared to exploit the interplay between the different languages to first disrupt the power relations of doctor-patient discourse and then to take over the powerful role for themselves as doctor, although the patient always won in the end. In a second project, three children developed versions of a popular comic book in their native languages. As with the role playing, the comic book encouraged new forms of social interaction as well as becoming a vehicle for metalinguistic discussion. Again, there was an interweaving between genre and the use of the different languages and a chance to express common aspects of social identity within the classroom. The children experienced aspects of difference through speaking and writing other languages and entered into their bilingual classmates' world on new terms. (NAV)

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CROCODILE DUNDEE MEETS HIS MATCH IN URDU: BRIXTON PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILDREN SHAPE A MULTILINGUAL CULTURE

Charmian Kenner

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CROCODILE DUNDEE MEETS HIS MATCH IN URDU: BRIXTON PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILDREN SHAPE A MULTILINGUAL CULTURE

Charmian Kenner

As part of a research project on language awareness in multilingual primary school classrooms, I worked with nine to ten year olds in Brixton, South London, to develop roleplays and make comic books in different languages. One of my aims was to find out whether such work would help to increase metalinguistic understanding, and in a report on the project (Kenner, 1993) I describe how the children began to discuss the detailed structure of the languages involved. However, they were equally concerned with wider aspects of communication, and in this paper I would like to speculate further on how new forms of discourse seemed to emerge through the multilingual activities, and seemed likely to contribute to change in an already dynamic classroom culture.

The need to develop multilingual practices

Within most inner city schools, there are a number of children who are bilingual, and classes therefore have the potential to be multilingual. Yet it is rare for these languages actually to be used in the classroom. If they are, it tends to be by the bilingual children only, as some kind of demonstration, without their classmates participating in the experience. Multicultural events are often encouraged, such as the celebration of festivals, and this occasionally involves some use of language: for example, writing in Chinese for Chinese New Year. Yet, essentially, children have to leave their home language outside the classroom when they step over the threshold. Educationalists who believe in a strong link between language and culture can only surmise that a vital part of bilingual children's identity is being suppressed within the classroom. Other children too may experience constraints on identity within the limited confines of official school culture, which remains resolutely monolingual, based on Standard English.

I would suggest that this situation can perhaps be changed through the participation of all children in new practices, in which they are given the opportunity to speak and write in a number of languages, including each

other's and their own. It is this concrete experience of creating a multilingual discourse together which can change the balance of social relationships, and enable children to explore a range of identities.

Theories of language and culture

In reflecting on the possibilities which multilingual practices could open up, I have drawn on Volosinov's work on the philosophy of language. He suggests that difference is a spur to communication; when languages meet, 'linguistic crossing' can result (Volosinov, 1986, p.19). He also talks of the 'multiaccentuality of the sign': different social groups will offer different interpretations of the same sign, and this intersecting of accents gives the sign its 'vitality and dynamism and the capacity for further development' (Volosinov, 1986, p.23). As language develops into new paths, new cultural forms are created, and there is a constant interaction between linguistic and cultural change.

Ben Rampton has looked at language crossing within mixed race groups of white, Afro-Caribbean and Asian young people, analysing the development of 'interracial Panjabi' to explore and deal with difference, and to develop an oppositional culture to that of Standard English (Rampton, 1991). This research took place largely in the playground and in youth clubs, and the question arises as to whether similar effects could occur if children have the chance to use languages more freely in the classroom.

Vygotsky's ideas on children's language development indicate that the path of learning is likely to be affected by the cultural context in which it occurs, and particularly by the social relationships involved. Perhaps, therefore, existing constraints on language use mean that the educational potential of multilingual classrooms remains largely unexplored as yet. The work of Burgess and Hardcastle (1991) in secondary English teaching shows how, if young people can be encouraged to draw on genres from their specific cultural background, new types of narrative can be produced as a result. In my own research, children were able to experiment with different languages as well as with genre, and I shall suggest that these two areas of exploration interacted in particular ways, often with unexpected results.

The roleplay project

The whole class worked in groups of three, each led by a bilingual child, to devise a doctor-patient dialogue in that child's language, which they then performed for the rest of the class, who tried to guess from context and gestures what was being said. My original intention was to provide the conditions under which children might produce a roughly similar dialogue in, for example, Somali, Spanish and Urdu, and then to see whether children could compare some of the utterances, and notice differences in linguistic structure. Since I would argue that multilingual practices need to be grounded in social interactions which will enable children to produce meaningful language for their own purposes, I had chosen the doctor-patient roleplay as a communicative setting which also fitted in with the class topic, 'The Body'.

The activity proved even more popular than I had hoped, but, far from generating a set of similar dialogues, the children produced an enormous variety of scenarios and utterances. Storylines ranged from the dramatic helicopter rescue of a mountain climber with a broken leg, conducted in Spanish, to the extraction of a pair of classroom scissors apparently embedded in the neck of a patient who was crying out in Chinese. The children took up the doctor-patient genre with enthusiasm, exploring the power dimensions in what is perhaps the ultimate discourse of authority. Everyone wanted to be the doctor, and in several cases this role was played by the bilingual child, who tended to take the lead in the activity.

Roleplays were developed in six languages (Somali, Spanish, Chinese, Urdu, Gujerati, and Sierra Leone Creole). Once the children had grasped that they should all speak their group's language, rather than only the bilingual child doing so, they began to create a dialogue involving whole utterances. Most children were speaking another language for the first time, and learning it from bilingual classmates, who themselves were often breaking new ground by using their own language in the classroom. When the roleplays were performed for the whole class, this novel situation seemed to produce an atmosphere of excitement and mutual respect. The bilingual children displayed a heightened self-confidence, whilst their peers had to take the risk of trying out unfamiliar phrases. Through the public use of different languages by all members of the class, these languages seemed to assume a new dimension, a right to be there. This effect was intensified when, a few weeks later, the class

repeated their roleplays as a coherent group presentation to an attentive audience at an all-school assembly.

I shall now consider in more detail how two of the roleplay groups dealt with aspects of genre and multilingualism. In the first case, Mathew, whose background is Irish, and Akeil, who is Afro-Caribbean, engaged in a mock judo fight in Somali. Akeil appeared to get hurt, and for help, the two boys were dependent on Amina, the Somali speaker, who was also the doctor. Their dependence on her was two-fold; firstly, on her role in the dialogue, since she was the powerful person who answered the emergency call and put on the bandages, and secondly, on her linguistic resources, since she could teach them Somali. Both of these aspects altered the more common dynamic between bilingual children and their peers, and, in this case, also between girls and boys. Amina, who was usually quiet and shy, became the central force within the group.

The roleplay developed by Mousir, Angharad and Nathan seemed to show a complexity of approach to both genre and multilingualism. They decided to each use a different language, so Mousir spoke his home language of Urdu, Angharad spoke in 'Welsh English' (her parents come from Wales), and Nathan spoke in 'Australian English' (he has visited family in Australia). Performers and audience appeared to accept that communication was possible when three languages were being used simultaneously: a novel assumption which perhaps reflected a certain openness to the possibility of linguistic crossing.

The scenario was presented as follows : Nathan, as the patient, stumbled into the surgery, obviously drunk, and said loudly 'G'day mate!' The audience laughed in recognition; Crocodile Dundee, as the Australian outback character who took on inner-city New York, was a popular figure in playground culture at the time. Angharad and Mousir, as the doctors, tried to examine Nathan, but he resisted, to comic effect; finally, Mousir gave him an 'injection' to calm him down. Angharad and Mousir then manoeuvred their patient onto a table and put on rubber gloves to perform a 'brain-change' operation (the 'brain' being represented by a fluorescent yellow tennis ball). During the operation, the doctors spoke to each other in Urdu.

In analysing this performance, I would suggest that the Australian character's extravagant language and behaviour were being used to undermine the highly formal atmosphere associated with a doctor's surgery, which is based on 'polite'

interaction, controlled by the doctor in Standard English. The children's laughter may have showed identification with this challenge to authority; they, of course, would have experienced only the patient's role in real life. They may also have appreciated the opportunity to see a playground character taking centre stage in the classroom; their own playground language can be oppositional, a way of dealing with the disparity in power between children and adults, but is not normally used in class. Mousir and Angharad's response to their patient's insubordination involved the use of Urdu, which could be seen here as becoming a powerful discourse, known to these two children, but unknown to the patient or audience, perhaps adding to the sense of mystery which often surrounds the pronouncements of the medical profession.

Thus the children seemed to exploit the interplay between different languages to firstly disrupt the power relations of the typical doctor-patient discourse, and then to take over the powerful role for themselves. The patient, however, was allowed to win out in the end; Nathan made a remarkable recovery from the operation, and his first words were (still in 'Australian') 'Where's my beer?'

The comic book project

Like the roleplays, this was initially designed to stimulate children to look at linguistic structure. Three children - Vishal, who speaks Hindi, Maggie, whose family is Chinese, and Peter, a mixed-race child - worked together to make Hindi, Spanish and French versions of a 'Minnie the Minx' cartoon from *The Beano*. Each book was in the form of a reading game, to be played by their classmates, who would first need to guess what the cartoon characters might be saying, and then find the answer in English, concealed elsewhere on the page or at the back of the book.

As with the roleplay work, the comic books seemed to become the spur for new forms of social interaction as well as being a vehicle for metalinguistic discussion, and again, I identified an interweaving between genre and the use of different languages. In contrast to medical discourse, comic books could be said to be very much the children's own genre, and indeed I suggested the idea for this reason, speculating that it would heighten involvement in the activity. All the children displayed a certain excitement at the chance to work with comics in class, since they were normally restricted to break-time reading. Bilingual children seemed to share in the familiarity with comic book culture,

which has a strong connection with the playground language which young learners of English seem to pick up so quickly. Vishal, for example, was particularly adept at creating pieces of dialogue in English for the 'Minnie the Minx' story, and his peers showed their appreciation of his sophisticated wordplay.

The use of this genre thus gave all children, including those who were bilingual, the chance to express common aspects of social identity within the classroom. As the work progressed, Vishal was able to feed his language into the comic book genre to make a new cultural product. 'Minnie the Minx', re-made in Hindi, looked both familiar and unfamiliar to the reader, and attracted considerable interest from his classmates.

The children's experience of reading and writing in Hindi whilst producing and using the book seemed to alter their relationship to the language and to each other. Vishal could speak Hindi fluently, but was initially less confident about writing it, so he needed to ask his mother to provide a translation of the English dialogue for the comic book story. The following tapescript extract, recorded whilst he was copying his mother's writing into the comic strip, shows a growing sense of enjoyment and satisfaction.

Charmian: Have you practised your writing before?

Vishal: Yeah - you know I used to go classes, but I didn't like the teacher, so I left it.

Charmian: How old were you?

Vishal: Oh, about seven, I still remember - I've still got my books, the Hindi book it's got ABCD. I'll bring them if I can still find them.

Later :

Charmian: When you feel tired of doing the writing, then you can switch and do something else.

Vishal: No I don't think I can get tired doing the writing, it's fun. I wrote ten minutes, it's two words!

Vishal's pride in his writing was increased when Nathan, who is Afro-Caribbean, began to look at the Hindi script in the comic book, and immediately asked 'Who drew that?' Deciding to try out Hindi for himself, Nathan began to copy a phrase from a dual language story book. The physical and mental

challenge of producing this new written form led him to place a high value on the language and on the people who could write it. Meanwhile, his discussion with Vishal enabled the latter to re-evaluate the idea of Hindi classes.

Nathan: The easiest thing is, drawing the first letter and doing the line...(to Vishal) your mum must be really good, 'cause the thing what's hard about this, is getting the thing straight!

Vishal: You know my mother, she knows English writing and Indian.

Charmian: Yes, that's pretty clever, isn't it.

Nathan: Vishal, was you born in India?

Vishal: No, I was born in England.

Nathan: You weren't born in there? That's why you can't talk it so good, isn't it?

Vishal: Yeah, my mum was born in there, so she can do it.

Nathan: You should learn it.

Vishal: Yeah I am, I'm going to classes.

Vishal and Nathan went on to create new language together, when Nathan asked for help to write something for his own purposes:

Nathan: Has anyone got a dictionary in Hindi? 'Cause I could have writ my name in Hindi.

Vishal: That'll be 'Nathan Thompson' still.

Charmian: But it would be in different writing wouldn't it?

Vishal: Yeah - it'd be a different 'N'. (shortly afterwards) Can I try? I'll just try something... N-A-T-H- (writing in Hindi).... I think that's how you spell Nathan.

Nathan: Do you really think so?

Vishal: Yeah - that bit there, that's the N, that's the A.

Nathan: So I can write that down here.

Vishal may have produced his own version of Hindi writing here, rather than the standard script. This could be seen as a form of linguistic crossing, arising from a communicative encounter between the two children.

Nathan expressed the desire to continue working with Hindi :

Nathan: Hey Vish, after this, maybe we should study some of the words, like try and do the alphabet.

Vishal: Alphabet I can do, just a bit.

Nathan: And then we could write it out.

Meanwhile, Tania, an Afro-Caribbean girl who was reading the comic book at the same time, also became interested in Hindi, and both she and Nathan commented on extending the activity further.

Nathan: (pointing to what he has copied out) It's funny - looks like a little bit, but... if you learnt to write this in school now, you'd get into trouble every day, 'cause it's so long.

Tania: Imagine if you kept writing that every day and started getting good at it, and started writing it instead of writing English....

It seems that Nathan and Tania, like the children who participated in the roleplays, experienced aspects of difference through speaking and writing other languages, and entered into their bilingual classmates' world on new terms. Tania did not continue with the idea, but she may have been wondering what a classroom with a multilingual discourse would be like. Her reaction can lead us to speculate as to whether a sustained programme of multilingual practices could be set up in primary schools, and if so, what new linguistic and cultural forms might result.

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